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Faster Forward

By Rob Pegoraro

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Posted at 10:13 AM ET, 01/27/2011

Facebook 'Sponsored Stories' turn you into the ad

By Rob Pegoraro

Your clicks of Facebook's "Like" button and check-ins at restaurants, stores and other establishments are already valuable marketing material. Now Facebook is letting companies and individuals buy the right to republish those actions to your friends in ads -- including your name and profile photo -- on the social network's site.

Called "Sponsored Stories," these ads look like the other small ads that adorn the right side of the screen (which can already feature your name if you've Liked the product in question). In this case, as [a video](#) posted to [Facebook's marketing page](#) Tuesday explains, the ad will simply recycle your check-in or Like as an ad labeled "Sponsored Story."

In the video, Facebook developers explain how the format works and how it lets advertisers get around one disadvantage of people's check-ins and Likes showing up in the usual News Feed: "a lot of impressions do get lost because there's so much content coming through." One staffer also makes an important point that is already getting lost in [debates about this](#): "A sponsored story never goes to somebody who's not one of your friends."

[Mashable's story](#) offers a few more details about how this will work. Ben



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Parr writes that advertisers will be able to bid on the chance to repurpose not just Likes and check-ins but also posts on public pages and "actions within custom applications."

But they won't be able to pluck particular bits of content and instead can only have a percentage of those actions reused as Sponsored Stories -- which could lead to these ads broadcasting critical comments left at a check-in. I can see people checking into a fast-food establishment and leaving remarks along the lines of "better than starving" or "will need angioplasty sooner than I thought."

We'll see -- I haven't seen any of these ads myself yet, and I've only heard from one reader who has.

(Disclosure, part 1: Post Co. Chairman Donald E. Graham sits on Facebook's board of directors. Since he's also on my Facebook friends list, it's possible that I will see a Sponsored Story ad featuring his name and profile picture at some point.)

(Disclosure, part 2: Since I myself [use Facebook to market my work](#), I could buy Sponsored Stories ads to promote myself. I promise you that I will not do that.)

But one aspect of this ad program should be easy to predict: People won't like it. Facebook's poor presentation of it is bad enough -- the Palo Alto, Calif., company should have announced this on its blog, not in a video on a page many of its users don't know exists -- but its core mistake is not letting people opt out of Sponsored Stories.

It's a kind of bait and switch for the company to [launch check-ins as a way to connect with friends on the go](#), then turn that action into an unavoidable advertising medium only five months later.

Facebook should let users tell advertisers "no thanks, you're getting enough publicity already from my check-ins appearing in the News Feed." Better yet, it should let them share in some of the proceeds if they decide to take part: If a coffee shop is going to profit from publicizing my endorsement, the least it can do is offer me a cup on the house in return.

By Rob Pegoraro | January 27, 2011; 10:13 AM ET

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